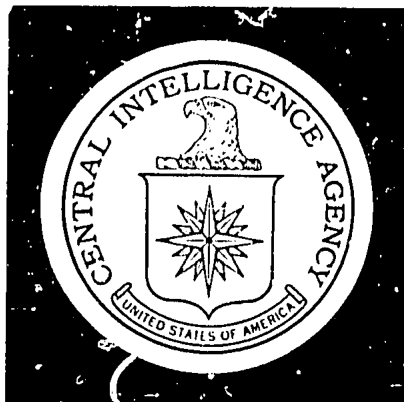


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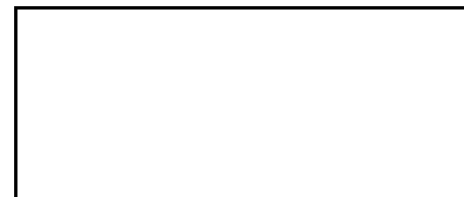
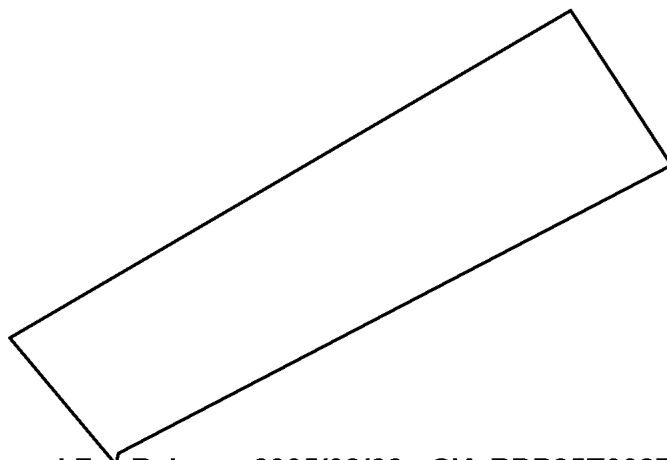
DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

Election Developments in South Vietnam

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2 September 1971
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
2 September 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Election Developments in South Vietnam

Introduction

The Lower House election campaign and, more particularly, the presidential election campaign may prove to be a watershed in the political development of South Vietnam. Recent developments in these campaigns have stimulated considerable political turmoil within South Vietnam and have sparked adverse publicity for the Thieu government at home and abroad. This paper traces the unfolding of these developments and examines some of their probable near- and longer-term repercussions.

Since the mid-1960s, there had been some evolution from strong-man government toward the development of a new set of rules that had given the opposition more freedom to maneuver and forced the incumbents to be responsive to a broader spectrum of the population. This trend began when political stability of sorts was re-established following a succession of military coups. In the Senate elections during the summer of 1970, voters had a relatively free choice, and an opposition slate actually did better at the polls than the strongest government-backed slate. The evolution has been gradual, and no one step was particularly impressive, but the cumulative effect over several years has been substantial.

This trend, however, has been arrested by a number of recent developments, including: the massive effort by the Thieu camp working through the government apparatus to get out the vote for favored Assembly candidates and later for President Thieu; Big

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Minh's decision to withdraw from the race on the grounds that Thieu is rigging the presidential election; the Supreme Court's abrupt reversal of its earlier decision that Vice President Ky had failed to qualify for a place on the ballot and its subsequent decision to remove Ky's name from the ballot; and President Thieu's announcement that the presidential election would be converted into a referendum. These events, some of which have been of dubious constitutionality, have recreated an image of the kind that marked the suppression of the Buddhist Struggle Movement in 1966.

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The Three Principals

1. The current situation can best be understood by reviewing the political views, calculations and miscalculations of President Thieu, Vice President Ky, and Big Minh as they approached the elections.

President Thieu

2. Thieu has never given much indication that he appreciated the potential value of the Senate elections from the government's point of view. Although the government superficially suffered a defeat in 1970 when an opposition Buddhist-backed slate attracted the most votes of the three winning slates, the government stood to gain in important, if indirect, ways. The fact that the bureaucracy had worked mightily to get out the vote, but had nevertheless permitted a fairly clean election to take place, persuaded many skeptics that it might be possible after all to have fairly contested elections in South Vietnam. The hands of those "militant" Buddhist leaders who had favored striving for political power via parliamentary means were strengthened significantly against some of their colleagues who would rather have taken to the streets. Partly as a result of the 1970 Senate election experience, over 1,300 candidates in the 44 provinces were encouraged to vie for voter support in the just-completed Lower House elections, a convincing demonstration of the growing interest in running for elective office and working "within the system."

3. Despite the help that the Senate elections of 1970 gave to South Vietnam's image, Thieu may well have regarded them more as a lapse than as proof at home and abroad that he was running a legitimate constitutional operation. He has never forgotten that the Thieu-Ky ticket polled only a 34.9-percent plurality when it ran in a field of 11 slates in 1967, and he has wanted a convincing majority mandate ever since. In his view, the more surface evidence of support the better. This helps account for his recent tactics in cornering virtually all the

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endorsements available from members of the National Assembly and from members of the provincial councils. Although this action was an essential part of his strategy to eliminate Ky from the race, Thieu also seems to feel that nominations and elections are like petitions--the more signatures, the greater the political impact. Accordingly, Thieu has cranked up the government bureaucracy--his political machine--to get out an overwhelming vote in the hope of first swamping the opposition in the Lower House elections, if possible, and then, most certainly, in the presidential election, now converted to a referendum.

4. During the past year, Thieu has given the lie to those who claim that he is not a politician. Although he is neither a good party politician nor a constructor of party coalitions, politics by party is not traditionally or currently the major modus vivendi of political operations in South Vietnam. Political influence is extended, rather, through religious organization and through the administrative and military bureaucracy. Personal magnetism and status are also very important. Thieu has shown a zest for personal campaigning in the provinces. He has visited virtually every part of South Vietnam, shaking hands as the bands played, handing out deeds under the land reform program, and pinning medals on local officials, reportedly to the delight of many South Vietnamese who otherwise would have no interest in the regime in Saigon. Thieu's staff has meticulously recorded his prior meetings with hundreds of rural notables at official conferences, helping him as he assiduously cultivates their personal good will when he visits these notables in their villages.

5. In four years in office, Thieu never has been responsive to the overtures of party leaders eager to make deals, having little faith in their ability to deliver the vote or otherwise bring him real support. But he has replaced more than a few province chiefs with men who would be responsive to his will. He has seen to it that many of his military officers, commanding over a million voting-age men in uniform, were instructed on how to help. Bureaucrats of all kinds have been organized to get

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out the vote. In the best tradition of American and European political campaigns, the Thieu camp has sought to establish voting quotas for every district and precinct. Even members of the lowly People's Self-Defense Force have been tasked with identifying which voters are for Thieu, which are neutral, and which are against the government, and they have been asked to try to swing as many neutral and opposition votes as possible into the government column.

6. It is not clear how explicitly the officials were told: "This is what President Thieu wants and we don't care how you get it done." But many province officials, thinking about what would happen to their careers if the returns from their areas displeased Thieu, interpreted their instructions in this way. Thus, many of the abuses of official authority at the local level probably have never been officially authorized from above but are the result of local initiatives meant to be responsive to Thieu.

7. The President seems to have planned his election strategy well in advance, holding his cards close to his vest. He has thought it out with more care than his rivals, who actually needed a good strategy more than he did. Ever since the multi-ticket race in 1967, it has been apparent to Thieu that the best way to make sure that the winner gets a majority is to make it a two-man race. There was some puzzlement last winter, however, when Thieu surfaced his plan to eliminate frivolous candidates. This plan required presidential candidates to secure endorsements from either 40 members of the National Assembly or 100 provincial councilmen. Big Minh and Ky were the two leaders, apart from Thieu, who seemed to be in a position to gather the kind of support needed to qualify under the proposed rules. It made no sense for Thieu to permit the development of such a three-man race, because Ky would take more votes from Thieu than from Minh, thereby weakening Thieu's over-all position. Hence, the puzzlement over Thieu's 40-100 provision, which eventually became law with the help of much pressure and alleged widespread bribery in the Assembly. But once the law was safely

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passed, Thieu set the second part of his strategy in motion, again with the help of considerable arm-twisting and amid more allegations of bribery. He cornered so many endorsements that there were not enough left, after Minh took his share, for Ky to qualify.

8. Whether Thieu thought that Big Minh would stay in the race is not clear, but, for all his planning and thoroughness, it is evident that he underestimated the reaction that Minh's withdrawal would provoke at home and abroad. Minh's reputation for indecision is such that some Vietnamese thought he would not have enough "get-up-and-go" to get up and go. The Thieu camp talked itself into believing that Minh would lose more face by quitting than by staying the course and getting whipped. Thus, Thieu overplayed his hand, intimidating Big Minh out of the race, leaving himself now with a referendum to demonstrate popular support.

Big Minh

9. Big Minh never was a very vigorous or determined candidate. It is characteristic of the man to "yield" to the urgings of his friends to do the things he already wants to do, but it is not his style to make up his own mind and press ahead decisively despite the doubts of those around him. He is convinced that he is more honest and ethical than Thieu (most South Vietnamese would agree with him on this point), and he believes that he is somehow better able than Thieu to bring peace to South Vietnam, although he does not appear to have thought the problem through or to have developed anything like a precise idea about how he might bring peace sooner. In fact, his declared unwillingness to help establish a coalition with the Communists or otherwise to lend himself to a Communist take-over of South Vietnam adds up to a position that is, of course, unacceptable to the Communists. The Communists nevertheless clearly would be pleased to see Thieu lose, and they probably calculate that a Minh government would offer more opportunities to destroy the unity, such as it is, of the anti-Communists.

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10. Ever since Thieu allowed Minh to return from exile in Bangkok in 1968, politicians of various hues have urged Minh to return to politics, hoping to catch a ride on his coattails. Having heard a chorus of appeals that only he could bring peace, Minh finally decided during the winter of 1970-71 to make himself available. He was not a hard-driving politician determined to make an all-out effort for a distant and difficult goal; rather, he saw himself as a possible savior of the country, needed and wanted by a majority of his compatriots. Victory would either fall into his lap without much real effort on his part, or if it did not, this would be prima facie evidence that the Thieu camp had rigged the election.

11. Although his reasons were different, Minh, like Thieu, disdained deals with political groupings that made overtures to him. He always correctly suspected that they were trying to "use" him and apparently was afraid that he would not in return be able to "use" them--the guts of many a political deal. Unlike Thieu, however, Minh never developed a political strategy worthy of the name, and he characteristically displayed little energy in any direction. He made no move to build a campaign organization where it counts--among the voters in the provinces. His only "organization" seems to have been the staff of advisers he assembled in Saigon. The closest thing to a country-wide campaign apparatus available to Minh was the An Quang Buddhists' organization of monks. The monks could have helped him carry many a district, but Minh's refusal to make deals and his generally poor prospects discouraged An Quang leaders from endorsing him publicly, much less from going all out to help him.

12. From the beginning, Big Minh's main campaign strategy has been to threaten to withdraw if the election were "rigged." With his simplified view of his prospects, Minh probably never saw any difference between his opponents' legitimate efforts to stack the odds against him--legal efforts that were nevertheless abuses of official authority--and out-and-out dishonest measures to create phony vote

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totals. Minh appears to have been just as much concerned about evidence that the government bureaucracy was mobilizing to get out the vote for Thieu--a common practice in much of Asia--as he was about uncovering duplicate voting cards printed to enable some voters to vote twice for the same candidate.

13. Minh clearly expected a certain amount of this latter kind of practice, and his oft-repeated threats to withdraw if it got out of hand were meant to keep such abuses and dishonesty to a minimum. What seems to have taken him by surprise, however, was the massiveness of Thieu's total campaign effort as it developed this summer. It naturally suited Minh's purposes when announcing his withdrawal to emphasize the government's harassment of his campaign workers and the duplicate voting cards, but he probably was equally dismayed to discover how unequal were his and Thieu's campaign organizations in numbers, skills, and efficiency.

Vice President Ky

14. Ky from time to time has been far from hard-headed about the practical aspects of certain projects in which he has taken an interest, particularly those involving sustained hard work. His short-lived leadership of the South Vietnamese Government delegation at the Paris talks is a good example. Consistent with his record in this respect, he never did take a hard look at his prospects in a race against Thieu, with or without Minh in the election.

15. Thieu has frustrated Ky's ambitions ever since he finessed Ky out of the top spot on the ticket in the 1967 presidential election. Ky genuinely believes that he would make a better president than Thieu because he is more decisive--he can still point with some pride to his firm handling of the Buddhist Struggle Movement in 1966; indeed, he generally performed well as prime minister during that difficult period. During the last four years, however, he has been chafing at his lack of real political

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power. He decided to throw his hat in the ring only after it became apparent to him that Thieu would not ask him to join the government ticket. Until that point last spring, Ky seemed to feel that he had little chance of beating Thieu and that he would be better off settling for the vice presidency if he could get it. Once it was clear to him that he was being spurned, however, he went on the attack, criticizing Thieu vigorously at every turn.

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[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] The President pushed his election bill through the Assembly and then prevented Ky from getting the needed endorsements. Ky's name was put back on the ballot for a while only because after Big Minh's withdrawal a second name seemed to be needed on the presidential ballot for the sake of appearances. The Supreme Court's eleventh-hour decision to validate the endorsements earlier declared invalid and its subsequent decision to remove Ky's name from the ballot may be justified in legal terms, but these decisions were clearly arranged behind the scenes by Thieu.

17. Predictably, Ky's main interest at this point is to make Thieu's life as uncomfortable as possible. Ky not only refused to play the patsy by acting as a strawman opponent at Thieu's convenience; he will do his best to harass the President and to goad other opposition elements to attack him during the balance of the campaign.

18. Ky still has longer-term ambitions, however, and he will do his best to become the leader of the opposition, a job that could be Minh's for the asking but one for which Minh has no stomach. The best organized of the opposition groups, however, are the An Quang Buddhists. They still remember Ky as the man who crushed their Struggle Movement in 1966, and they have no love for him. This necessarily limits Ky's prospects as the leader of any opposition coalition.

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The Immediate Impact on the Elections

20. Most elements of the populace with political ambitions in South Vietnam have only begun to focus on the presidential campaign, because they were heavily engaged in campaigning for the recent Lower House elections. An Quang Buddhists, Catholics, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, and the many parties all hoped to return representatives to Saigon. With the extensive assistance made available by the government to selected candidates from some of these groups, the government expected to return a proadministration majority during the next sitting of the House. Initial reporting on the election results indicates that the government has been successful.

21. As in the presidential race, there have been bitter complaints from opposition candidates about abuses on the part of government authorities. There have been reports from scattered provinces of opposition candidates under surveillance by the police, of campaign workers being roughed up or threatened with the draft, and of military personnel in civilian clothes disrupting political meetings. Some candidates threatened to withdraw, and a few did so. Although there were reports on election day of some irregularities in the voting, these do not appear to have been extensive. The voter turnout was heavy,

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moreover, with some 78 percent of those eligible voting, compared with 65 percent in the 1970 Senate election.

22. The general disillusionment and unrest already generated by recent developments in the presidential race have clearly increased the danger of a popular reaction against government manipulation of the Lower House election. An Quang candidates appear to have done fairly well in the main centers of Buddhist strength, but if Buddhist leaders nevertheless conclude that they would have done much better except for official interference, widespread protests could occur. Under such conditions, some opposition groups might well adopt more militant tactics and take to the streets.

23. In the referendum, President Thieu is likely to get the vote of confidence he seeks, barring the appearance of some new factor in the political equation, with the main question being the number of voters who go to the polls. The Buddhist opposition could call for a boycott, but it would be conspicuous for individuals to stay away from the polls on election day, and there will be many pressures to cast a vote. It seems more likely that many disenchanted voters will find some way to invalidate their ballots. This could be the only choice for voters who wish to take a position against Thieu on 3 October.

24. There may also be some efforts to disrupt the presidential balloting by citing unfairness, but this also entails considerable personal risk for those involved. The Communists, of course, are perfectly ready to take such risks, and they are much more likely, now that Minh is off the ballot, to grenade and mortar the polling places. Indications of unusual Communist interest in encouraging sympathizers to vote against Thieu (and for Minh) have always been mixed with other indications that the enemy is preparing for military action of various kinds timed to disrupt the elections.

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The Longer Term Impact

25. The events of August have provided ammunition to those who wish to attack the government's claims to legitimacy. These events have weakened support for such claims based on the long and difficult process from constituent assembly to constitution and through a series of elections that allowed the opposition real hope of attaining legislative office and a genuine voice in the shaping of policy. But cosmetics always play an important role in such matters, and currently the constitution and the elections appear more a facade for strong-man rule than a foundation for government.

26. The fact that the government in the South is well organized to get out a large vote and bring pressure on the public to vote so as to produce a result overwhelmingly in favor of the incumbent can be used by Saigon's critics to blur the differences between North and South--even though the differences are, of course, still enormous.

27. In the South, by design, there has been an evolution of rising political expectations based on more than the still new formal institutions of democratic government. In recent years, policy makers in South Vietnam have found many ways to respond to the needs of the people and to give them a sense of involvement with their government. Village self-help programs engage the people in working together on economic projects. Steps have been taken to revive local leadership in the villages. Land reform appears to have conveyed a real sense of the government's social concern in a number of areas. Government assistance in developing more profitable crops and in getting them to market has given many people a feeling that they have a personal stake in secure government control over their area. Although the people of South Vietnam are still deeply cynical about the motivation of political elites and the lesser officialdom, and the government's authority has often been most manifest through the undisciplined action of its troops passing through a village, nevertheless, the aforementioned programs and others like them have in

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recent years given the people some reason to hope that their concerns were becoming the concerns of government and that they would be given a fair shake.

28. Now the prospect of a one-candidate election is hurting the government's standing in the eyes of many South Vietnamese, particularly the more politically conscious and articulate segments of the population. It never has been easy to gauge how the Vietnamese people really feel about such matters, and the extent of their concern can only be guessed at, at least for a while. Nevertheless, recent developments have almost certainly offended the sense of justice of many South Vietnamese. They tend to confirm the judgment widely held in South Vietnam that Thieu lacks the high qualities of personal character attributed to Big Minh.

29. On the other hand, there is another important aspect of the August events that may have a very different impact on much of the population. Many people in Southeast Asia, like many US city-dwellers tend to respect leaders who know how to marshal political power and run an effective operation. Thieu may have won a few points by virtue of the very massiveness and toughness of his political operations.

30. Opposition elites must now review the bidding and perhaps recalculate their long-term plans to achieve a place in the sun. The two-year old debate among the militant Buddhists may be revived again, depending on how they read the Lower House election results. Some Buddhist leaders are likely again to urge a disruptive stance against the government.

31. Continuing resort to a more authoritarian operational style on the government's part seems likely. Recent experiments with Western democratic forms have been largely inspired by the US, when the US military presence and role were greatest. As Vietnamization continues and US influence on South Vietnamese internal affairs declines, there will be fewer and fewer restraints on all of the political elites in South Vietnam.

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The Likelihood of a Coup

33. Although the recent developments have damaged the always shaky unity of the non-Communist side in South Vietnam and have probably reduced popular support for the regime for a while, they probably have not made a coup more likely, even in the longer term. A successful coup requires the support of substantial components of the army, and the army leadership is probably not particularly upset by Thieu's tactics or by a one-man "race."

34. A coup would be a real possibility, however, if enough commanders come to believe that some development really unacceptable to them was in prospect. If the regime seemed to be coming apart at the seams, as a result of political squabbling or military reverses, the army commanders might step in to restore control. If they believed that a coalition with the Communists were being arranged, it is entirely possible that they would remove the arrangers. In the minds of many, the most important possibility that could spark a coup remains some future US move that would involve withdrawing support from the government then ruling in Saigon or from its essentially anti-Communist policies.

Conclusion

35. So far, the political impact of Thieu's heavy-handed tactics, of Minh's withdrawal, and of the Supreme Court decisions has been felt most keenly by those elements closest to Minh and Ky. Many opportunists at lower levels are also likely to be discouraged about ever getting anywhere within the legal system, and a more conspiratorial atmosphere may revive. There are a number of extremely bitter

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political leaders available to help conspire. Militant demonstrations and government suppressive measures, always a possibility in South Vietnam, now seem potentially more dangerous.

36. While these gloomy possibilities must remain of concern, it is well to keep in mind that many elements at work within the constitutional system may not feel immediately threatened or even feel particularly disturbed. The Buddhist opposition leaders, of course, are undoubtedly disturbed, but it is noteworthy that they remained heavily occupied with Sunday's Lower House election until it was over, suggesting that they may still feel that they have a piece of the action. Many villagers, moreover, benefiting from various government programs, may still feel that the government is looking out for their interests, sharp election practices notwithstanding. The army is probably not upset by recent developments. It is still possible that Thieu will look back on his own re-election and think: "Look at what I have orchestrated." Many South Vietnamese, not imbued with Western democratic ideals, may respect him for demonstrating such political power.

37. But President Thieu must now keep his guard up against an assortment of bitter men unlike any arrayed against him since he took office in November 1967. If he finds himself consulting with his generals again soon to assure himself of their political support, this will be a signal that South Vietnam is in danger of losing five years of political progress.

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